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Linda L. Lyman

Illinois State University, llyman@ilstu.edu

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Women Principals Leading Learning at *Poverty's Edge*

Linda L. Lyman

The author profiles two women principals of color who have successfully enhanced student learning in high-poverty schools. In their leadership narratives, the principals address how the complexity of poverty affects their work, how they affirm the worth and dignity of all, how they influence beliefs and attitudes of staff, why they think their schools have been successful in raising student achievement, and their top three recommendations for how school leaders can most effectively improve the education of poor children. The author concludes with the recommendation that we pay attention to what these leaders know.

Introduction

When I moved to Peoria, Illinois, in 1990, I moved literally to *poverty's edge*. The first time I opened the privacy fence gate to put out the trash, I was surprised. Across the alley and directly perpendicular to my house was a street of tiny homes, examples of scattered site public housing. Almost immediately the two little girls who lived with their mother in the corner house on the right were in my yard, wanting to know who I was. Charise was six and wanted to help me plant flowers. Laneisha was nine, more serious, and just wanted to talk. I did not meet their mother Taunya until a few days later. Caring for her girls with love and vigilance, Taunya asked me lots of questions. Just because I was a college professor did not automatically mean the girls could spend time with me, I realized. Happily I passed Taunya's test, and the fence gate continued to swing both ways. This family put a face on poverty for me, allowed me into their struggles and joys. My understanding of the complexity of poverty deepened, and my beliefs and attitudes about people living on welfare and in low-income families changed significantly. I moved to Peoria to teach educational leadership at Bradley University, where I had many students who were teachers in the urban school district that serves Peoria. I became passionately interested in how principals lead schools that are successful in providing quality education for students from families living in poverty.

Successful Leadership in High-Poverty Schools

Scheurich (1998) and Lomotey (1989, 1993) suggest that the most effective

About the Author

Linda L. Lyman is a Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University. A former Fulbright Scholar, she was an invited participant in the 2007 UCEA International Women's Leadership Conference in Rome. Her academic degrees are a B.A. from Northwestern University, 1963; an M.A.T. from Harvard University, 1964; and a Ph.D. from University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1990. Email: llyman@ilstu.edu.

tive leadership for high-poverty schools with large numbers of minority students will be provided by persons of color. Ending a chapter in a book about successful leaders of high-poverty schools, I wrote the following:

My review of case study research suggests that many successful leaders of high-poverty schools are African American and Hispanic. Many are women. It is past time simply to hear about the leadership patterns and practices of educational leaders who speak from a perspective of diversity. It is time to honor their voices by listening and following their lead. (Lyman & Villani, 2004, p. 46)

As expressed by Ah-Nee Benham and Cooper (1998), we can learn much from voices of diversity that ring with the "undersong of marginalization" (p. 141). Some scholarship has focused exclusively on the leadership of minority women (AhNee-Benham, 2003; Ah-Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Alston, 1999; Atlas & Capper, 2003; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Brunner, 2003; Dillard, 1995, 2003; Jackson, 1999; Mendez-Morse, 1999, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). One theme in this scholarship is leadership that reflects alternative values and visions. Leadership practices of women of color often emerge from values of nurturing and protecting the children as well as expecting the best from and for them. These leaders' insights from personal experiences of oppression can make them powerful voices for equal opportunity and social justice. These leaders are often found in urban schools. AhNee-Benham and Cooper (1998) write about such women leaders, "They carry in their hearts the desire to create communities for children that foster a sense of inclusion and value rather than oppression and alienation" (p. 142). In other words, one might say, "having crossed boundaries in their own lives, they are determined to prevail against the odds" (Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005, p. 30). They are also determined to help children prevail against the odds.

Deficit thinking about poor children, particularly if they are from minority groups, contributes to learning and teaching failures because "too many educators see only children with problems and limited potential instead of children of promise" (Lyman & Villani, 2004, p. 5). School leaders who understand the complexity of poverty do not engage in such stereotyping

(Dillard, 1995; Lyman, 2000; Quint, 1994; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Scheurich, 1998; Valencia, 1997). They believe that the children can learn at high levels and demonstrate that belief in all their interactions. They attend to the children's needs for self-esteem and equitable learning opportunities. They encourage teachers to practice culturally relevant, culturally responsive, culturally proficient, and culturally sensitive teaching practices (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2002–2003; Valverde & Scribner, 2001). They influence the attitudes and skills of faculty in countless ways.

Purpose of the Paper

In presenting an overview of the literature of leadership for social justice, Larson and Murtadha (2002) describe one of the three strands to be “portraying alternative perspectives of leadership” (p. 137). They assert

As more women and ethnic minority populations entered the historically European American and masculine domain of educational administration, researchers became increasingly interested in studying leadership of marginalized groups. This body of inquiry has brought to light values and images of leadership that had been missing from mainstream leadership theory and practice (p. 139).

They reference the work of Jackson (1999) in pointing out

... women of color have led under-resourced schools for years, and yet their narratives have not been a significant part of the reform literature in educational leadership. This omission limits our insight into how we might improve public schools serving poor children of color (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 141).

The purpose of this paper is to add to the educational leadership literature two portraits of women leaders of color who are making a difference to the learning of children living in poverty. I visited two successful Illinois high-poverty schools in November 2007 and talked with the principals, Laura LaSalle who is Hispanic, and Dr. Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat, whose heritage is the West Indies, about how school leaders can improve the education of poor children. I was familiar with their leadership successes from having them as students in several classes in the Illinois State University doctoral program. I served on Dr. Desmoulin-Kherat's dissertation committee. Komensky Elementary School (75% low income) and Whittier Primary School (62% low income) are each an Illinois Spotlight School. This state award is given to schools with at least 50% low-income students and at least 60% of these students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading and math on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Additionally, a Spotlight School must make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for three consecutive years. My visit to each school lasted half a day during which I

spoke informally with a number of teachers and staff, and I asked each principal these questions, tape-recording their answers:

- In what ways does the complexity of poverty affect how you work with low-income children and their families?
- In what ways does your school affirm the worth and dignity of low-income, often minority, children and their families?
- How have you influenced the beliefs and attitudes of your faculty and staff with regard to poverty and learning, or the ability of children living in poverty to learn at high levels?
- Describe the most important action you personally have taken to bring about higher achievement/greater learning in your school.
- Why do you think your school has been successful in raising achievement of students living in poverty?
- How do the members of your school community know that you care?
- What would be your top three recommendations for how school leaders can most effectively improve the education of poor children?

Their answers to these interview questions are interwoven in the rest of the paper. The profiles of the two principals and their schools are offered in the spirit of portraiture developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). After presenting sketches of the principals and their leadership practices, I will conclude with their recommendations for how school leaders can improve the education of children living in poverty.

Komensky Elementary School, South Berwyn, Illinois

Laura LaSalle is in her third year as principal of Komensky Elementary School, a PK–5 school of 410 students, located in South Berwyn, a suburban community approximately 15 miles west of the center of Chicago. The school district has six elementary schools and two middle schools, with a Hispanic student population that continues to increase. The demographics of Komensky with regard to race and ethnicity are 88.5% Hispanic, 6.8% Caucasian, 1.5% African American, 1.5 % Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.2% American Indian. The low-income rate for the school population is 75%, with 37.8% labeled as Limited English Proficient, and 84.1% who come from a non-English background. There are 32 certified and 12 non-certified staff members, with one bilingual classroom at each level. On the 2007 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), the school-wide scores showed 88% of students meeting or exceeding the state standards in math, and 75% meeting or exceeding in reading.

Laura, who is Hispanic, began her educational career with almost 20 years in middle level special education, specializing in behavioral/emotional disorders, followed by six years as an assistant principal. I asked

Laura why she was attracted to the principal's position at Komensky. She responded,

It was the demographics. I saw this as a school with a culture where I could make a difference because of my early childhood experiences and my passion for finding answers to the Hispanic achievement gap that exists even in my own family.

As a child Laura lived not far from Komensky in a home where Spanish was the primary language. Until she was fourteen, she lived with her mother and a grandmother who maintained old world customs. Then her mother remarried and Laura's world expanded beyond the neighborhood.

Laura frames the complexity of poverty in a Latino context. One complexity of poverty affecting learning for poor minority children is not having much background knowledge. "This is a gap for them from day one, and the gap tends to be larger for language minority students," she said. Best instructional practices for Latino children require making connections to the texts, other subject areas, and their culture. "We don't teach anything in isolation. We integrate the learning," Laura emphasized. Another complexity is whether the families are from rural Mexico or urban Mexico, because they bring different experiences. In part to address the experience gap, the school sponsors field trips and has a free Extended Day program after school and during the summer for students below grade level in reading. The program incorporates instruction and recreation, including activities such as dance, chess, Girl Scouts, computers, writing and sports. Laura contended,

Because the children often are burdened by added responsibilities at home, you have to look at the whole child. If socially and emotionally a child is not ready to learn we have to take care of that and that's a complexity that middle class white teachers don't always understand. If leaders don't have an understanding of the complexity of poverty, I really don't think they can make a difference.

Laura knows she serves as a positive role model for the entire Komensky community, observing, "It's a good thing I am Latina. I see in parents and students the thought 'we can aspire to higher levels' just because I'm the principal." She starts each morning with announcements that set a positive tone, reinforces the skill of the week, uses humor, and makes a personal connection with the children. School-wide use of an extended PBIS model (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), with a focus on intrinsic incentives, contributes to the school's positive environment. Laura regularly enlightens faculty attitudes by interpreting the Latino culture of the students. For example, she helped teachers become more positive about student tardiness by putting it in a cultural context.

The large numbers of tardies we have directly relate to Latino culture. We know Latinos have a different sense of priorities about time. If you see a neighbor or

someone from your family in the street on the way to school you will stop and greet them and talk. I have helped staff understand that tardy will always be a part of our school. We don't ignore it, we work to improve it, but we are not going to criticize students. I don't want kids afraid to be here because they were tardy. We work hard to make the children feel they are as good and have as much potential in society as anyone else. We talk as a staff about not using negative criticism. We even stay away from using the word "no."

Because she understands the cycle of oppression and negativity in the lives of Komensky neighborhood families, Laura is passionate about the school being a positive place. She believes that much of the learning success at Komensky can be explained by how everyone at the school is consistently "caring for the kids and the community."

Laura has built a relationship with the families. She worked with the custodian to bring about a transformation of the building that said to parents "you and your children are important." The parents noticed the cleanliness and the student artwork in the halls immediately. An inviting entryway with a comfortable chair replaced a storage area. Next to this space is a large community bulletin board that parents are encouraged to use. Families who are members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) are featured in a hallway wall display just around the corner in the front hallway across from the office. Before Laura became principal the practice was only to allow English to be spoken by parents in the school.

I helped the staff understand that it was okay for parents to speak Spanish in school. We would show patriotism to our country and our language, but it was okay to allow translators at meetings and allow parents to speak their language, so this was a change that I brought.

Because of the openness to Spanish and other changes, parent volunteerism has increased and attendance at school events has more than tripled, with 200 attending the fall Open House. Now the PTA has a large membership and a Latino executive board president. Meetings are held in conjunction with every special school-wide event. Invitations sent home to parents for school events are individually hand-made by each student, a practice that appears to have increased attendance. All the parents know Laura. "I am out there, visible, face-to-face, before and after school. I make it a practice to greet every parent. I have an open door, and I am open to parents' suggestions. I'm a listener. I always return parents' calls." Teachers build relationships through face-to-face contact with parents of all their students. The school offers parents free learning opportunities, such as classes in computers and English as well as parenting skills. Parents are able to participate in the school's breakfast program for a nominal fee and their presence provides an extra measure of supervision and creates a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Laura and the teachers have collaborated to make the school welcoming to the community, from the entryway to classroom doors featuring welcome signs.

When Laura became principal at Komensky student achievement on the ISAT tests was showing an upward trend, but the school was still on the watch list. Previously, the teachers were not involved in analyzing achievement data and results were just handed to them. When Laura began to involve teachers in the data analysis process, the upward trend accelerated and during her second year, the school earned recognition as a Spotlight School. Understanding implications of the data, teachers moved from managerial discussions at meetings to rich instructional dialogue. Confronting the data, they faced the biggest question: “Now that we *know*, what do we *do*?” Continuing to be a catalyst, Laura gathered the research, providing articles on learning, poverty, and bilingual programs. She went to grade-level team meetings and participated in the dialogue, understanding it was important to be visible. “I try to help the staff understand that everything should be child-centered to help children learn. I work as an advocate for them and provide them the tools they need,” she said.

Laura and the teachers have established a philosophy of active engaged learning using all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, and cooperative learning using Kagan structures. She sought funding to establish learning centers, and made it possible for teachers to give guided lessons with smaller groups of students. The faculty has developed horizontal and vertical articulation of the curriculum, and implemented extended-time reading with ability grouping. Laura has reorganized financial resources and reconfigured building space to enhance learning. The Even Start and Head Start programs, previously housed in small storerooms, are now integrated into the school. Each program finally has a regular room and the teachers collaborate and communicate with other faculty. She explained,

Because typically only 30% of the kindergarten class exits with basic literacy skills, all the faculty are beginning to see how important these preschool programs will be to our success and the whole community. We work hard to make classrooms literacy rich because of the language development issues.

Laura summarized, “We call ourselves a learning community. We believe that the kids can learn and we believe in each other.” Her collaborative leadership over three years has set in motion changes that enhance learning through (a) increased attention to creating a positive environment; (b) mutuality and respect in a parent partnership based on a welcoming of Latino culture; and (c) enriched instruction, responsive to the children’s experience gaps as well as their cultural strengths and based on best practices, data analysis, and progress monitoring.

Whittier Primary School, Peoria, Illinois

Dr. Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat is in her seventh year as principal of Whittier Primary School, a PK–4 school of 400 students, located in Peoria, a mid-sized city in central Illinois. The district has 29 schools, including 15 primary or elementary schools, ten middle schools, five high schools, and 9

other schools. The demographics of Whittier with regard to race and ethnicity are 52.8% African American, 42.8% Caucasian, 3.5% Hispanic, 0.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.1% American Indian. The low-income rate for the school population is 62%, with only 2.8% labeled Limited English Proficient. Not only is Whittier a Spotlight School, but in 2005 the U.S. Department of Education designated it a Blue Ribbon School. It has met AYP every year. There are 29 certified and 16 non-certified staff members. On the 2007 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), the school-wide scores showed 84% of students meeting or exceeding the state standards in math, and 69% meeting or exceeding in reading.

Sharon, who is of West Indian descent, attended primary school in Roseau, Dominica, until she was ten years old, and then completed middle and high school on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Along with English, she describes “a sporadic flow of Creole” as having been spoken in her home regularly when she was growing up. An educator for 20 years, Sharon was certified as a history teacher. She first taught English to Vietnamese students at Catholic Social Services. Then for four years, she taught all subjects to at-risk middle level students in a truancy alternative program at the Urban League, before she was asked to become Director of Education. Reflecting on her ten years at the Urban League, Sharon said, “I had a lot of fun and assisted many clients to accomplish their goals. I learned a lot about social justice, dismantling the status quo, equity, excellence, compassion, understanding, advocacy, enthusiasm, commitment, and making a difference.” She moved to the public schools, out of curiosity partly, to see what kind of an impact she could have, and was an assistant principal for three years before becoming principal at Whittier. Sharon describes herself as a listener who works hard to minimize barriers to teaching and learning. Being accessible, responsive, compassionate and nurturing are attributes important to her.

Sharon views the complexity of poverty at Whittier as a microcosm of larger societal problems. The school’s poverty rate has increased, and the associated problems have become more challenging. These include problems of children who have personally witnessed violence or seen too much violence on TV, live in stressful family situations, and have anger issues. School-wide use of Second Step, a violence prevention curriculum, teaches skills that promote pro-social behavior. The school also confronts poverty-related issues of mobility, temporary foster home placements, and juvenile delinquency, as well as the gap in experiences with which children living in poverty usually start school. An extensive after school program addresses the experience gap with activities such as drama, chess, science, Girl Scouts, orchestra, robotics, and sports. Sharon believes the job of educators is to work with each child, wherever he or she is along the learning continuum. “We can’t be about ‘business as usual’ but must be intentional and deliberate to promote teaching and learning,” she said. Through her example and encouragement, Sharon focuses teachers on “. . . what we do have control over, maximizing the time we have with the children, ‘bell to

bell' learning, all the things that are necessary to move the students forward academically."

Sharon reinforces the "be positive" message in weekly "Monday Morning Memos" for the faculty. "Poverty kids don't like people to demand. We get lots more when we encourage them than when we demand," she believes. Photos of Whittier children decorate the large windows of the front office. A prominent sign on Sharon's office door features the single word "Imagine." She assists a mostly white middle-class staff in getting "... past the attitude that families who are poor don't care about their children." She reminds teachers to remember that the students are talented and smart despite their different background experiences. Describing the environment, Sharon said,

We listen and are not mean to the students. We genuinely care about the students and give them opportunities while guiding them. There is lots of trust. They know they will be treated in a nurturing manner. Especially when kids are in a bad situation, we try to be nurturing. We don't look down at people, children or parents, but make them feel comfortable and welcome. My door is open to anyone. I am here to help the children have success.

Sharon gives announcements and recognizes accomplishments of students and faculty at the daily morning assembly. She sends the children off to class with positive messages, "Work hard, be nice to each other, let's be positive, have good listening ears, and learn as much as you can today. We learn a lot, work hard, and celebrate!"

Sharon values parent engagement and invites participation. Whittier's active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meets monthly and maintains funds that financially support a wide range of projects. Parents volunteer in classrooms, including the computer lab, and are welcome in the school at any time. Sharon is particularly attuned to staying in touch with what the parents want from the school. "The parents living in poverty see educators as 'in charge' of educating their children, so our job is to teach the academics, social and behavior skills as best we can," she said. Her dissertation research was titled "Meaningful School Leadership from the Perspective of African American Parents" (Desmoulin-Kherat, 2006). Ten themes for meaningful leadership that contributes to achievement of their children emerged from parent interviews. These included dismantling the status quo and attitudes of excellence. The parents want leaders who will inspire success and "can show proven and measurable academic results" (p.190). However, the parents also want leaders who can build relationships, Sharon emphasized. "Cooperative efforts by parents and staff will be possible only through strong and trusting relationships. The parents are asking for relationships that show respect to the children" (p. 202). Sharon's caring two-way communication expresses respect and builds relationships with parents.

Describing instructional practices at Whittier, Sharon said, "At this juncture, we are a data-driven school, where teachers are leaders, in a pro-

fessional learning community.” Professional development is focused on teaching and learning, issues of poverty, and issues for black males. The staff is exposed to the achievement gap literature and encouraged to reflect on what the data is illustrating.

Some staff members were initially put off by the concept of disaggregating data to see the deficiencies, so we had to have that discussion about why. If teachers get genuine answers they will move on. They work hard at what I ask them to do. [The school philosophy is] . . . keep to the evidence and focus on what we can control. As they have planned out improvements the achievement gap disappears—in 3rd grade math this year there was no gap, for example.

Sharon observed,

In a professional learning community as you work with the data, each student’s learning status becomes evident. What we have learned over several years of taking this approach has benefited all the students, not just low-income or African American students.

Sharon highlighted the school’s focus on standards, expectations, and monitoring of results. “We analyze data quarterly and have developed a customized version of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. We work to meet individual needs of students at all levels with a push on training teachers on differentiation,” she explained. This year the school is piloting standards-based report cards, a final link in Whittier’s tightly aligned systematic approach to raising student achievement. Sharon’s committed leadership over seven years has enhanced learning through (a) attention to maintaining a positive environment and attitudes; (b) a parent/school partnership based on mutual concern for the well being and learning of all children; and (c) focused best practices instruction based on the standards, data analysis, and ongoing progress monitoring.

Improving the Education of Poor Children

Some studies have found the explanation for high-poverty school success in “technical strategies and factors such as measurable goals, curriculum aligned with learning standards, increasing instructional time in reading and math, and accountability systems” (Lyman & Villani, 2004, p. 95). Other studies emphasize “personal relational leadership and the role of the principal in bringing about abandonment of an attitude of deficit thinking about the children and their abilities” (p. 109). The best principals integrate both approaches and value the worth and dignity of children and families living in poverty. Laura and Sharon are clear examples. They lead collaboratively, build relationships, intentionally focus instructional efforts on effective strategies, and pay attention to data and progress monitoring. Quality education at Komensky and Whittier results from the dynamic interaction of these components, as well as the power of positive beliefs and attitudes, plus partnerships with parents.

I asked each principal to describe the most important action she had taken to bring about higher achievement. Laura answered, “Shared leadership and everything associated with it.” She elaborated,

My staff knew they needed to make instructional changes and they had the willingness and capability to do so if given the training and the tools. I appreciated them, built their confidence that they did have the tools and moved to shared collaborative leadership. Originally, the teachers saw my style as that of someone who didn’t know what she was doing. Today they boast about our shared approach, and about all of our committees. They understand the power behind collaborative decision-making.

Laura commented that her investment in getting a doctorate, long term participation in the Illinois Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (IASCD) and now her position on the executive board, communicate to the staff “that I am knowledgeable and aware of instructional practices going on in schools throughout the state. They feel confident through my confidence.”

Sharon claimed as her most important action, “Focusing on high quality teaching through bringing teachers into the process of data analysis, and having rigorous standards.” Upon further reflection she added, “Making possible a focus on academic interventions and small tutoring groups to close the gaps.” These strategies alone would not have made Whittier an award winning school, however, without the positive and nurturing environment. Sharon said about her staff,

We are proud of being a family, a professional learning community, of nurturing, listening, and guiding the children as we minimize barriers to learning. It’s about the children. They will do for us once they see we are doing good things for them—and genuinely care.

Recommendations

I asked these exemplary principals to give three recommendations for how school leaders can most effectively improve the education of children living in poverty. Because context always matters, Laura LaSalle began with the disclaimer that

... a principal can’t just use the research in isolation, but you use your data, use the staff, know the kids, and make what you do purposeful for their unique needs. Have eyes everywhere and develop an awareness of where people are before moving with courage to what is best for the community.

Her three recommendations were succinct:

1. Believe that the children are capable of learning.
2. Be courageous and act on that belief.
3. Take purposeful action in harmony with your goals.

Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat had a different approach, saying, “Leader-

ship is the responsibility of the entire system, not just the principal. Those involved must know what it takes to change achievement.” In that spirit, her three recommendations were addressed to different groups of school leaders:

1. Board members and central office staff need to provide additional resources, including funding for smaller class size, mentoring, and incentives for exemplary teachers.
2. Principals need to keep the focus on data analysis, encourage lesson adjustments, support the norm of best practices, and obtain resources.
3. Teachers need to be leaders, share best practices with each other, and provide high quality learning experiences to students.

My recommendation is that we pay attention to what leaders like Laura and Sharon know about improving the education of poor children. For me, *poverty's edge* was an address in a neighborhood I could leave behind, but for too many Americans and their children *poverty's edge* is a harsh reality they cannot escape. They live quite literally on the edge of insecurity, between food and hunger, between hope and despair. Their numbers grow annually. Committed knowledgeable leaders like Laura LaSalle and Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat lead exceptional high-poverty schools with caring environments and excellent educational programs that simultaneously maximize learning and minimize the sharpness of *poverty's edge*. They lead children and their families towards hope. They make a difference.

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